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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to identify teachers' expectations of schooling and their causal attributions regarding the academic performance of their students. Data were collected by means of a questionnaire administered to 451 elementary school teachers. Analyses led to the following conclusions: (1) teachers hold high expectations of schooling for successful students and low expectations for unsuccessful ones; (2) major reasons for the high expectations of schooling for successful students were the students' and their families' interest in academic life and the students' intellectual aptitude; (3) the major reasons for the low expectancy level for unsuccessful students were low socioeconomic status and their own and their families' lack of interest in academic life; (4) academic success was attributed to effort, family interest, and teachers' skills in teaching and in relating to students; and (5) academic failure was attributed to low socioeconomic status, lack of family interest, lack of effort, and failure to do school work. Six references and four statistical tables conclude the document. (Author/RH)

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TEACHERS' EXPECTATIONS AND CAUSAL ATTRIBUTIONS FOR STUDENTS' ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This study had the purpose to identify teachers' expectations of schooling and causal attributions regarding the academic performance of their students. Data were collected by means of a questionnaire administered to 451 elementary school teachers. Data analyses led to the following conclusions: (1) Teachers hold high expectations of schooling for the successful students and low expectations for unsuccessful ones; (2) The major reasons for the high expectations of schooling for successful students were the students' and their family interest in their academic life as well as the students intellectual aptitude; (3) The major reasons for the low expectary level for unsuccessful students were theirs and their families' lack of interest in their academic life and low SES; (4) Academic success was attributed to effort, family interest and the teachers' relationship and teaching skills; (5) Academic failure was attributed to poor SES, lack of family interest, lack of effort and failure to do school work.

Teachers' Expectations and Causal Attributions for Students' Academic Achievement

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The study of school failure in Brazil cannot avoid taking into consideration the role performed by the teachers inside the classrooms. Their pedagogical action, what they do and think and how they interact with the students give meaning and quality to the learning experience, increasing or decreasing the probability of failure. It's well know that teachers' opinions and expectations about the academic performance of the students are related to their actual performance. It's the self-fullfilling prophecy demonstrated by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968). Besides, the experience of success or failure also seems to be associated to expectations of future success, level of effort spent in the task and future performance. These effects have been reported by several investigators (e.g. Crandall, 1975; Schifelbein and Simmons, 1981). Crandall for

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This paper is based on the authors' previous work: Expectativas de Escolarização e Causas Atribuídas ao Sucesso e ao Fracasso Escolar. In Gama, E. M. P. (coordinator) Diagnóstico Estadual da Educação State Diagnosis of Education , Vol. IV. Vitória, ES: PPGE/UFES, 1985, 182-224.

instance, describes several studies showing that:

1. Subjects that were given a high expectancy of success performed better in intellectual tasks than those who were given a low expectancy.
2. Children who hold a high expectancy that their effort may produce good grades in school or in other intellectual tasks spend more time and effort in the tasks than those children with low expectancy.

Academic achievement, in turn, seems also to be related to the student's self-concept. The literature suggests that students who perform well at school also feel more capable to do well and feel better about thenselves than those students who perform badly (Brookover, Patterson and Thomas, 1964, Taliuli, 1982).

In summary, teachers' expectations and attributions regarding the academic achievement of their students seem to be strongly associated to the child's success or failure in school. The experience of success or failure, in turn, is related to future expectations, future performance and self-concept of the students. It is a vicious circle where the only way out is to drop out of school.

The experience of school failure and its likely consequences for future performance are, most certainly, one of the most powerful mechanisms of social selectivity that

operate in the schools. Considering that school failure, represented by retention in the grade and drop out, affects mostly children from low socio-economic origins, failure ends up being "justified" by apparently "technical" reasons of the school, which cover up its political purpose, that is, to reproduce social inequalities.

This investigation was designed with the purpose to identify teachers' expectations of schooling and attributions regarding the academic performance of their students. It was our intention to critically analyses the implications of their expectations and attributions for their role as educators.

Methodology

Subjects

In a previous study, the State where this research was conducted was divided in six regions for purposes of analysis and according to geografic, socio-economic and cultural criteria (Gama, Jesus, Doosey, Carvalho, Lucas, Salviato and Gonçalves, 1984). In the present investigation six counties, one located in each region, were intentionally selected following the criteria of: easiness of access, easiness of contact by the Department of Education to bring the teachers together and number of elementary school teachers hired by the State system (counties with too few teachers were avoided). The subject pool invited to take part in the study was all the state public

school elementary teachers who were working in the six selected counties.

Only state public school teachers who worked at the elementary level were invited for the following purposes: (1) About 75 percent of the elementary school children are enrolled in state schools, and (2) the highest rates of retention and drop out occur during the first four years of schooling.

A total of 451 teachers, about half of the invited population, came to the meeting. The sample was proportionally distributed between rural and urban school teachers. About half of the teachers worked in one-classroom schools. All grade levels were represented in the sample and 28.1 percent of the teachers worked with classrooms with more than one grade level. The majority of the teachers had the minimum education required to teach elementary school in Brazil (82%) and 13.7 percent also had a college degree.

The subjects mean age was 30.85 ($\underline{s}$ = 7.64) and most of them (80%) had been teaching in elementary school for more than two years. Rural school teachers were significantly younger, had less time of teaching experience and reported a lower family income than urban school teachers. Only four of the subjects were male.

Instruments

The data were collected by means of a questionnaire containing three sections:

1. The first section collected biographical data about the subjects such as: sex, age, academic training, teaching experience, type and location of the schools were they worked, grade level (or levels) they were responsible for and family income.

2. In the second section the subjects were asked: (a) to estimate how much schooling they expected that their students who have been doing well and those who have been doing badly would attain. (b) to choose, from a list of six dichotomous options, up to three of the alternatives that better explained their expectation of schooling. The options covered reasons of school availability as well as socio-psychological and economic conditions of the student and her/his family.

3. The third section collected information about the teachers' causal attributions of success and failure. In each case, the teachers were presented a list of 15 attributions and an open question. They were then asked to choose up to seven options that best explained the "causes" of the school success, and in the second case, the school failure of their students. The options presented included attributions related to general school conditions, teacher qualifications and behavior, student's characteristics, family support and socio-economic

conditions.

The content of the set of options proposed was draw from the literature as well as from the authors' own experience and familiarity, with the educational problems of the State.

Procedures

The data were collected in six previously scheduled meetings, one in each county. Prior to filling in the questionnaire the following procedures were carried out:

1. The subjects were informed of the general purposes of the meeting, i.e. to collect teachers' opinions and perceptions about the educational problems in their respective counties and their possible determinants.

2. Posters with educational data showing the performance of the county was presented and explained to the audience. The data included rates of access to school (at age seven) promotion, drop-out and teacher qualification (the county's state and private school systems and the State average). The information was widely debated among the participants in terms of their possible determinants and measures for correction.

Following the discussion the questionnaire was distributed and filled in.

Analysis of the Data

Simple descriptive statistics were used. In order to evaluate the level of importance attributed to the various reasons chosen by the teachers to justify their expectation of schooling for the students the weight given to each reason was computed and it was equal to the number of times a reason was chosen, over the total number of teachers within each type of expectation, times 100.

In the same manner, the level of importance or weight given to the various causal attribution options was computed and it was equal to the number of times an option was chosen, over the sample size, times 100.

Results and Discussion

The data information about three sets of variables: teachers' expectations regarding the level of schooling to be attained by their students, reasons expressed to justify their state expectation and causal attributions of academic success or failure. The results will be reported separately.

Teachers' Expectations for Students Schooling

Analysis of the data presented in Tables 1 and 2 show that, in general, teachers hold a high level of expectation of schooling for students who have been doing well. The combination of the two highest categories - "they will finish

secondary school" and "they will finish college" show that 47.4 percent of the sample emitted this level of expectation. However, when the students who have been doing poorly are considered teachers hold lower expectancy levels.

Data showed that 45.6 percent of those students were expected to only finish up to the fourth grade.

Insert TABLES 1 and 2 about here

Although the results presented here refers only to the sample the same pattern was found in each one of the six counties where data were collected.

A simple plotting of the data presented in TABLES 1 and 2 show that teachers' expectations for students who have been doing well, compared to the expectations for students who have been doing badly, run in opposite directions. As the educational level increases, expectations for success students also increase while expectations for failure students decrease.

The results also suggest that it seems easier for the teachers to estimate the educational level to be attainned by students who have been doing poorly than the level to be attainned by success students.

This may be due to the fact that since teachers expectations are quite low for the former, they can not see

how other factors could interfere in the acquision of only four years of schooling. Indeed, even the availability of schools is not a very serious problem during the elementary school years, though it might be in the following years. It is also true that the attainment of just a few years of schooling may be perceived by the teachers as a logical consequence of the students' poor performance.

In the case of successful students, even though teachers hold a much higher level of expectation, it seems that these expectations are not only a function of the students' academic performance. Other variables may be influencing the teachers' expectancy level.

Reasons Expressed to Justify the Expectations of Schooling

The weight obtained by each one of the various reasons presented to the subjects as possible justifications for their expectations was computed. They represent the level of importance attributed to the several options and are listed on TABLE 3.

Insert TABLE 3 about here

Overall, the data suggest that the "need to work" was considered at all expectancy levels, except at the college level, as the most important variable in preventing both groups of students from advancing their education. Next, the

"lack of family interest" was also seen as an important obstacle for both good and poor students, at the elementary and junior high levels. Furthermore, teachers felt that the lack of economic conditions to study in another county was an important variable in preventing good students to further their education. On the other hand, "the students' own lack of interest" was considered a strong impediment for poor students to pursue education beyond the elementary and the Jr. High levels, while the lack of economic conditions to study in another county constituted a major problem only at the secondary school level.

The only positive reasons chosen with high frequency by the teachers to justify their expectancy for student schooling were: the students' and their family interest and the students' intellectual aptitude. However, they were only considered important to justify a college level expectation and for success students. Even though this data refers to the whole sample combined, the same results were observed in the analysis by county.

In summary, according to the teachers, the major reasons for their high expectations of schooling for success students were: the students' and the family interest, as well as, their intellectual aptitude. Their SES, expressed by their "lack of conditions to study in another county" and their

"need to work", as well as the lack of family interest have been perceived as the strongest obstacles to students progress. For unsuccessful students the main reasons for the teachers' expectations were: the students' lack of interest, the family's lack of interest and the students need to work.

These results seem to confirm the notion that teachers' expectations of schooling are not only a function of students' academic achievement; other factors play a role on the expectancy estimation, mainly in the case of successful students.

It is important to point out that teachers appear to accept the notion of social determinism, as it is suggested by their perception of SES as quite a strong barrier in the schooling process. This is evidenced by the high weight obtained by SES related factors as obstacles to the progress of good students. Furthermore, teachers attributed to the students and their families the other part of the responsibility thus confirming the notion that students' progress is determined by their personal characteristics and by their family practices and attitudes towards education. Teachers did not question, once so ever, the conditions of the school services provided by the public school system, neither questionned the type of chances that are offered the students to allow them to attain higher levels of education.

It's likecy that the association of the social and psychological determinism with the notion that schools has little to do and are not responsible for students progress contributed to the development and maintenance of a very low level of expectation, mainly in the case of students who have been failing.

Causal Attribution for Students' Success and Failure

The weight abtained by each one of the causal attributions of success and failure is reported on TABLE 4. Analysis of the data shows that the causal attributions most frequently selected to explain success were: student's effort (65,8%), family interest in the student's school life (57,4%), teacher's relationship skills (50,9%) and teachers adequate teaching skills (48,1%). On the same manner, the causal attributions most often chosen to explain failure were: student's lack of effort (75,6%), family lack of interest in the student's school life (75,4%), the socioeconomic background of the family (62,8%) and the fact that the student does not do all the school homework (52,6%).

Insert TABLE 4 about here

The composition of the most frequent items chosen to explain success suggest that teachers think that, in this case, SES origin can be overcome if the following conditions

are present: individual effort, family support and teachers' technical ability and relationship skills.

Among the various causes presented to explain school failure lack of individual effort and lack of family interest in the student's academic life were considered the major ones. Besides those, all the other causes of failure considered of importance were also related to student's personal and familial conditions. The options regarding school conditions and teacher qualifications were attributed low importance. This configuration is interesting once teacher qualification was consistently mentioned as a cause of success. In other words, it seems that while teachers see themselves as partly responsible for success, they do not assume any responsibility for failure, attributing it, mainly, to student's personal and socioeconomic conditions.

The major importance attributed to the socioeconomic conditions of the student's family, as a cause of failure, compared to the little weight attributed to the same variable, as a cause of success, lead to the conclusion that, for the teacher, the students do badly because they are poor and do not have the personal and familial conditions to overcome poverty and succeed. On the other hand, the public school student who does well does so regardless of being poor because besides his/her own effort, he/she has the family support and

has a teacher who knows how to teach, and to relate to the student.

Analysis of teachers attribution of causality for their students academic achievement shows a tendency, on their part, to displace the responsibility for failure from the realm of the school and the teacher qualification to the exclusive responsibility of the student and his/her family. By doing so, he/she reveals a deterministic and powerless attitude towards failure, thus suggesting a lack of capacity to promote the desirable changes in the school.

Furthermore this attitude is probably communicated to the students, making them feel helpless to overcome their difficulties and to acquire the education they have a right to.

Conclusion

The data obtained from the elementary public school teachers regarding their expectations of schooling for their students, as well as, the causes they attributed to success and failure; were quite consistent, allowing for some conclusions. In general, the results showed that:

. Teachers have high levels of expectation of schooling for the students who are presenting a good performance. On the other hand, they hold low expectation for the ones who

performe poorly.

: As the expected educational level increases, expectations for success students also increase while expectations for failure students decrease.

. The major reasons for the level of schooling that teachers expect for the students who are doing well are: the students and the students' family interest, as well as, their intellectual aptitude. On the other hand, students' socieconomic status, family lack of interest and the unavailability of schools are the strongest obstacles their progress.

. The variables that justify the teachers' low level of expectation for the students who are doing poorly are, mainly, the students and their families lack of interest, as well as, their low SES.

. Teachers attributed success to the following: student's effort, interest of the family in students' school life, and the teachers ability to teach and to relate to the students.

. Failure is attributed to: students' lack of effort, students' family lack of interest in school life, students socieconomic conditions and to the failure to complete the school homework.

The reasons presented by the teachers to explain their expectation of schooling are quite similar to the, causes they

attributed to success and failure. In general, data suggest a unity of thought, that privileges the socio-psychological and economic factors as the main determinants of student's performance and level of schooling to be attained. Besides not assuming their share of responsibility for school failure (although they do see themselves as partly responsible for success) teachers free the school and the State from any responsibility, displacing the question to the realm of the family and the student him/herself.

In synthesis, teachers' representations do not demonstrate a critical position and a contextualized view of education and social selectivity in the schools. This is shown, once the teacher particularizes the question of school failure, attributing its causality to the student and his/her family, excluding himself/herself from any responsibility and, ignoring the responsibility of the school.

Teachers' beliefs, opinions and expectations are indicators of their attitudes towards education and, in a manner or another, are probably associated with their action in the classroom and their relationship with the student. In this sense, the results of this research are quite concerning, since they reveal a deterministic teacher who does not believe in his/her action and in the school action to promote changes.

Therefore, the school continues to reproduce the power

structure of society. In this sense, the school legitimates, under an apparently technical justification, its political purpose that is: the selection and elimination of the low socioeconomic class students from educational opportunities.

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TABLE 1

Teachers' Expectations Regarding the Amount of Schooling to Be Attained by their Students

Expectation of Schooling	Students' Performance			
	Good		Poor	
	n	%	n	%
They will only finish the grade they are enrolled in now	3	.7	11	2.4
They will finish the 4th grade	82	18.2	195	43.2
They will start but not finish Jr. High School	19	4.2	47	10.4
They will finish the 8th grade	59	13.1	80	17.7
They will start but not finish Secondary School	19	4.2	12	2.7
They will finish the Secondary School	116	25.7	35	7.8
They will finish college	98	21.7	15	3.3
Did not respond	55	12.2	56	12.4
N	451	100.0	451	100.0

TABLE 2

Teachers' Expectations Regarding the Top Level of Schooling to Be Attained by their Students

Expectations of Schooling	Students' Performance			
	Good		Poor	
	n	%	n	%
Some will only complete part and others will finish Elementary School	85	21.5	206	52.2
Some will only complete part and others will finish Junior High School	78	19.7	127	32.2
Some will only complete part and others will finish Secondary School	135	34.1	47	11.9
They will finish College	98	24.7	15	3.8
N	396	100.0	395	100.0

TABLE 3

Weight Obtained by the Reasons Chosen to Justify Teachers' Expectations of Schooling

Reasons \ Expectation/Academic Performance	Elementary School level		Jr. High School level		Secondary School level		College level	
	Good	Poor	Good	Poor	Good	Poor	Good	Poor
Availability of schools	4.9	8.1	10.7	14.9	27.5	23.8	30.0	46.7
Unavailability of school	46.9	15.2	21.3	8.3	31.1	11.9	8.9	6.7
Student's interest	1.2	4.1	13.3	5.8	16.0	19.0	47.8	20.0
Student's lack of interest	34.6	73.1	33.3	60.3	12.3	42.9	5.6	26.7
Family's interest	3.7	6.6	10.8	9.1	23.7	11.9	50.0	20.0
Family's lack of interest	45.7	52.3	40.0	47.1	16.0	28.6	5.6	20.0
Student has no need to work	3.7	2.5	6.7	3.4	2.3	0.0	2.2	6.7
Student needs to work	74.1	57.9	72.0	64.5	52.3	45.2	20.5	20.0
Student's high intellectual aptitude	1.2	5.6	9.3	3.3	27.3	0.0	44.4	26.7
Student's low intellectual aptitude	3.7	19.5	0.0	21.5	0.8	14.3	1.1	14.3
Existence of economic conditions to study in another county	2.5	2.5	2.7	1.7	4.6	4.8	10.0	13.3
Lack of economic conditions to study in another county	55.6	20.3	60.0	36.4	56.1	54.8	32.2	26.7

NOTE. Each teacher chose at least three reasons to justify her/his expectation.
The weight obtained by each reason is equal to the number of times a reason was chosen over the total number of teachers within each type of expectation times 100.

TABLE 4

Weight Obtained by the Causal Attribution Options Chosen as Reasons for the Students' Success or Failure

Causal attribution options[a]	Success Students	Failure Students
.The physical conditions of the schools are adequate (inadequate)	13.6	18.5
.The didactic material is adequate (inadequate)	18.9	14.9
.School books are available (unavailable)	19.4	22.9
.The teacher has (lacks) good teaching skills	48.1	11.3
.The teacher has (lacks) an adequate knowledge of the content material	28.3	5.9
.The teacher has (lacks) good relationship skills	50.9	12.6
.The support (lack of) given to the students	33.3	5.4
.The student's effort (lack of)	65.8	75.6
.The student's high (low) aptitude	19.4	38.2
.The student's high (low) self-confidence	28.9	34.1
.The student does (does not) all the school homework	24.6	52.6
.The difficulty (easiness) of the school work	4.5	1.3
.The family interest (lack of) in the student's school life	57.4	75.4
.The help given (not given) to the student at home	25.8	46.4
.The socio-economic conditions of the family contributes positively (negatively) to performance	34.5	62.8

NOTE. Each teacher chose up to seven options considered most important. Weight=number of times an option was chosen over the sample size, times 100.

a. The words in parenthesis refer to the attributions of failure.